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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether a writing style called "dialogue writing" would allow children to use conversational cues to write longer papers in the same amount of time as free writing. Subjects were 54 sixth graders (about 12 years old) in 3 classrooms in rural neighborhoods--one class consisted of children with learning difficulties. Dialogue writing samples were compared with standard narratives written by the same subjects. Results showed that children wrote longer stories and enjoyed the sessions more when writing in dialogue; that is when they told a story by having the characters "talk" to each other. The results were the same for children with different reading abilities and academic motivation. Findings suggest that dialogue writing can be a valuable component of the elementary writing curriculum. (Two tables of data and a figure are included.) (RAE)

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Talking on paper: Dialogue as a writing task for sixth graders

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Running Head: DIALOGUE WRITING

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Abstract

When children first learn to write they often find it difficult to think of things to say. It has been suggested that elementary school children rely on a conversational model of communication when writing and find it difficult to generate content in the absence of a conversational partner. In this paper we describe a writing task called "dialogue writing." In dialogue writing, children tell a story by having the characters "talk" to one another. Dialogue writing samples from sixth graders (12 years) in three classrooms were compared with standard narratives written by the same subjects. The results showed that children wrote longer stories and enjoyed the sessions more when writing in dialogue. There was no difference in the results for children with different reading abilities or academic motivation. The results suggest that dialogue writing can be a valuable component of the elementary writing curriculum.

Talking on paper: Dialogue as a writing task for sixth graders

There has been much recent interest in how children learn to write and what aspects of the process they find difficult. This interest has been prompted in part by the conclusion that "performance in writing in our schools is, quite simply, *bad*" (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1986, 3). In addition, researchers have found that students dislike writing more and more as they get older (NAEP, 1986). As a result, research on effective methods of writing instruction has increased, with the goal of helping children learn how to write better and enjoy writing more.

Several researchers have suggested that when children first begin to write in elementary school, they rely on a "conversational model" of communication (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Children learn the rules of conversation well before they begin formal schooling, particularly the rules of turn-taking (Nelson & Gruendel, 1979). In conversation, the child typically produces a sentence or two and then waits for the other person to respond. The response made by the conversational partner then serves as a prompt or cue for the child to say something else. Thus, in conversation the burden of maintaining the exchange is shared between two or more participants. The remarks of other people can also trigger new information in the child's memory that he or she can then include in the conversation.

In contrast to conversation, when the child is writing he or she must produce text in the absence of a communicative partner (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982; Hillocks, 1986). This aspect of the writing process may contribute to the young writer's typical problem with generating content. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) have shown that young writers often find it very difficult to think of material to write about. They hypothesize that the child approaches the writing task as he or she would a conversation: the child writes a sentence or two and then stops, as if waiting for a response from another person. It

also appears that elementary school children do not know how to search their own memories for additional information without input from another person. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) have shown that in many cases children do have additional information in memory on the topic of the composition, but that they cannot always retrieve this information without help from an adult (such as a question about a specific point or the request to "tell me more about that.") They found that fourth-sixth grade children wrote more if they were provided with a set of sentence openers such as "Another thing," "Even though," and "One reason." When children ran out of ideas they selected a sentence opener and then completed the sentence. Children reported that these prompts helped them "think of things to write" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987, 62).

A related task that might also allow children to use their knowledge about conversational communication while writing is dialogue writing. In dialogue writing, children imagine different characters and then tell a story by recording the conversation between the characters. A version of dialogue writing has previously been used with special-needs students. For example, Staton (1985) had hearing-impaired students and their teachers communicate through journals which they exchanged on a daily basis. Farley (1986) later used the same method to increase the communication capabilities of mentally retarded individuals. They both found that written conversations with the subjects' teachers increased the subjects' writing skills and output. However, little research has been conducted on the use and effect of dialogue writing in the elementary school classroom. We decided to teach sixth grade students to write stories in dialogue, and to compare these writing samples to ordinary stories written by the same children. We hypothesized that the dialogue task would allow children to use conversational cues to write longer papers in the same amount of time. We also examined the possibility that there would be a certain type of student who would perform better using dialogue rather than narrative writing. We chose to examine the factors of sex, reading level, and the children's academic motivation, because previous research had shown writing ability to

be linked to these factors (Berse, 1974; NAEP, 1986).

Method

Subjects. Fifty-four sixth graders (M = 11-9) participated in the study. There were 23 boys and 31 girls. Children were from three sixth grade classes. One of these classes was a special-needs class which included eleven of the students (eight boys and three girls). The children in this class had learning difficulties and had each repeated at least one grade. All of the children were white and from schools in lower middle class rural neighborhoods. Reading comprehension scores from the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) were provided by the schools.

Materials. Four different colored pens (blue, black, red and green) were used by each child when writing. The writing tasks were demonstrated on the chalkboard using colored chalk. Each child filled out a questionnaire assessing his or her interest after completing each writing task. Children also completed the Harter Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Questionnaire (Harter, 1980) as well as Harter's Self-Perception Survey (Harter, 1985). These questionnaires assessed several aspects of academic motivation (specifically, how well children liked challenging work, whether they felt they could estimate their own level of performance without teacher feedback, their opinion of their behavioral conduct, and their general feelings of self-worth and scholastic competence.) A cassette tape recorder was used to record interviews with some subjects about their feelings towards the various tasks.

Procedure. The first author (a student teacher) served as the experimenter. He visited each of the three classes once a week for a half hour, one hour after school began. During each session, he explained the task he wanted the subjects to use when writing that day. He then demonstrated the procedure on the chalkboard.

Two writing tasks were used by the subjects during the experiment. In Dialogue Writing, children were told to think of two, three or four characters and pretend that these characters were talking to each other about the story topic. Each character was represented by a different colored pen; in this way the reader knew who was talking by the color used. (This avoided problems with quotation marks and the redundancy of "he said" and "she said".) Children were told to write the entire story in this style, with no use of expository writing.

Seventeen subjects did not follow the Dialogue Writing procedure exactly during one of the three dialogue sessions. The most common errors were including narrative, using quotation marks and putting the name of the character before the character spoke. The process was explained before every session so that any problems or questions could be addressed. At the end of the experiment only five subjects had never completely followed the rules for the Dialogue style (the need to include narrative was the problem for all of these subjects) and were therefore not included in the results.

The second task was Free Writing, which employed normal sentence and paragraph structure to convey a story. As in dialogue writing, children used three different colored pens and alternated the color of each line. (Three pens were used for free writing because children were allowed to pick two, three, or four characters in the dialogue sessions. Three colors represented the average of these options.)

Children were allowed to write on any topic. A list of fifteen possible topics was offered before every session to aid them in deciding, but they were not restricted from choosing other topics. They wrote for ten minutes during each writing session. After ten minutes they were told to make a mark where they were on the page and then to continue the story if they wanted. After each session, students were given a questionnaire asking how much they had enjoyed the writing assignment, whether they would like to do more such

writing, and whether they had been bored while writing.

Design. The experiment employed an ABAB design. The Free Writing task was used during the initial baseline phase and the Dialogue Writing task was the intervention phase of the experiment. There were several trials for each phase so that students who were absent during a given week could still be included in the study. In the first Free Writing session (the A phase), there were two trials to establish a baseline. There were also two trials used in the first Dialogue Writing session (the B phase). The third and fourth phase of the experiment -- the second Free Writing (A) and Dialogue Writing (B) respectively -- each consisted of one trial. Students who participated in one of two trials in each of these four phases were included in the study. In the seventh week the instructions for both the FW and the DW style were read and children were allowed to choose the writing style they wanted to use, to see if certain students would tend to favor one task over the other.

Results

We were first interested in whether children actually wrote more in the dialogue sessions than the free writing sessions. The number of words that each subject wrote in ten minutes was counted for each session. In the first Free Writing phase of the experiment children wrote an average of 79.67 words. This rose to 107.89 words in the first Dialogue Writing phase. In the second Free Writing phase the average fell to 91.83 words produced in ten minutes, and for the second Dialogue Writing phase the average rose again to 103.36 words. A Class (3) x Reading Ability (3) x Writing Phase (4) analysis of variance, with Writing Phase as a within subjects factor, confirmed that children wrote significantly longer stories during the Dialogue phases, $F(3,72) = 4.93$, $p < .01$. There was also a significant difference in the number of words produced by the three classes, $F(2, 28) = 12.84$, $p < .01$. Newman-Keuls pairwise comparisions ($a < .01$) showed that Class 1 wrote significantly more words overall than Class 2 or Class 3 (the special-needs class.) There was no effect of Reading Ability and no interaction. The

mean scores are listed in Table 1 and displayed graphically in Figure 1. An example of a child's dialogue is shown in Table 2.

We also checked whether children simply used shorter words when writing dialogue, which might have resulted in more total words produced, by examining thirty randomly-selected papers from both FW and DW sessions. There was no significant difference in the number of polysyllabic words as compared to monosyllabic words between FW and DW. In the Dialogue stories 77.5% of the words contained only one syllable, compared to 80% of the words in the Free Writing stories. Each paper was also examined for spelling errors. Spelling error percentages were calculated for each child by taking the number of errors divided by the total number of words; each word only counted as one error, even if there were obviously two different spelling errors in it. An analysis of variance showed that there was no difference in the number of spelling errors for the Dialogue and Free Writing stories, again suggesting that children relied on similar vocabulary for both tasks. There was also no difference in the number of children who continued to write after the ten minute time limit for Dialogue vs. Free Writing. Children continued their Free Writing stories 46.55% of the time after the ten minute period, and they produced an average of 13.56 extra words. In Dialogue writing, children continued their stories 57.73% of the time, and they wrote an average of 16.37 additional words. These differences did not reach statistical significance. This result suggests that children did not write less in Free Writing phases because they felt prematurely constrained to end their stories in a traditional manner before the ten minutes was up.

All of the subjects filled out questionnaires after each writing assignment. They were asked to assess their enjoyment of the task on a six point scale. After Dialogue Writing children reported that they had enjoyed the task significantly more than after Free Writing, $F(1,38) = 9.29$, $p < .01$. When children were allowed to choose Dialogue or Free Writing, children who chose Dialogue also reported that they enjoyed the task more than

children who chose Free Writing, $F(1, 49) = 5.27$, $p < .05$. However, although the children enjoyed the Dialogue sessions more they were not significantly more likely to choose it during the last session of the experiment. In fact, only 33% of the subjects chose to write in Dialogue, while the remaining 67% chose Free Writing.

We had also been interested in how different types of students might respond to the two writing tasks. Reading ability, sex of the subjects, and the results from the Harter questionnaires regarding academic motivation were all tested against the number of words written, the spelling error percentages, the children's enjoyment of the sessions, and the choice that children made during the final session. Some comparisons were significant. Children who were more academically motivated and who preferred challenging schoolwork tended to enjoy both writing tasks more and to be better spellers. In addition, girls wrote significantly more and spelled better than boys, which is consistent with earlier research (e.g. Applebee et al., 1986; Berse, 1974). Surprisingly, however, reading ability was not related to how much children wrote.

Discussion

The results from this experiment showed that sixth graders wrote longer stories and enjoyed writing more when they wrote in dialogue than when they wrote traditional narratives. Several factors may have contributed to the Dialogue advantage. First, previous research had suggested that thinking of things to say was a primary problem for younger writers. Dialogue may have led to more extensive output because each character's remarks served as prompts for the next response. Thus, the developing conversation acted as a scaffold that helped the child continue the story. One child supported this notion by reporting that Dialogue was "neat because you can stop and go to the next person when you run out of ideas." Parents and teachers often serve a similar function when they read and respond to a child's work-in-progress. Dialogue writing may allow the child to begin to take on some of this responsibility for him or herself.

Other factors besides the conversational structure of dialogue may have contributed to the results. For example, it is possible that children found the dialogue task more interesting simply because it was novel and thus concentrated harder on their work. However, the dialogue advantage remained throughout the seven week experiment for two of the three classes. In addition, the decline in output for Class 3 (the special-needs class) during the last Dialogue session may have resulted in part from its proximity to the Thanksgiving holiday. (Our observations suggested that the children found it particularly difficult to concentrate that day!) The similar spelling error and word complexity rates for the two types of tasks also suggest that the conversational structure of dialogue was responsible for the effect, rather than a difference in the types of words used in the two tasks.

It is also possible that the children were somehow sensitive to an unconsciously expressed preference for dialogue by the experimenter. In a more carefully controlled experiment, the instructions might ideally have been presented with a tape recorder. However, aside from the logistical and motivational difficulties this would have presented, we felt that it was important to administer the two tasks as they would be in the typical sixth grade classroom. In addition, it is not necessarily clear that an unconscious preference for dialogue would have been translated by the children in a demand to write more words, as opposed to a demand for neater handwriting, more careful grammar, or more creative story ideas. The fact that children continued to write after the ten minute period equally often for both tasks also argues against this type of explanation. Finally, it is our belief that even in the worst-case interpretation-- that is, that the children were only responding to an inadvertantly-expressed adult preference for dialogue -- the fact that children wrote more and enjoyed their writing more would still make the dialogue activity a valuable one for teachers to include in their writing programs.

In addition to the Dialogue effect, the results also showed that children in one class wrote significantly more than children in the other classes. The fact that class 3 wrote significantly fewer words than class 1 was not surprising, as the former was a special education class. The surprise came from class 2. Sixth graders at the school had been randomly assigned to classes 1 and 2, and there was no difference in average reading ability between the two. We therefore concluded that the difference in writing performance resulted from differences in teacher management style and emphasis on writing in the curriculum. The fact that the dialogue advantage was still obtained for both classes suggested that this task can work well for many types of teachers and writing programs. Similarly, the results suggested that the dialogue task can be used successfully with a range of students, including good and poor readers, and children in special-needs classes.

An important question that needs to be addressed is why two-thirds of the children chose Free Writing during the final session even though they reported that they enjoyed dialogue more. One explanation may be that the time limit of ten minutes was too restricting for most subjects. For example, one student reported that he felt rushed with Dialogue Writing because he always had more to write than he could say in the time allowed. A second possibility was that the children may not entirely have believed the experimenter's assurance that these writing assignments would not be graded or given to their teachers, particularly since they knew that it was the final such writing task. It would follow that they would choose the more traditional style if they thought their classroom grade might be affected.

What are the implications of this study? First of all, there are the practical applications of the results: It should be relatively easy to incorporate dialogue into most classroom writing programs for sixth graders. However, we must also justify the general importance of a writing task that is more pleasurable to students and produces more words. It is

possible that regular dialogue writing might eventually help to improve the quality and sophistication of the writer's narrative work as well. The authors of the 1986 Writing Report Card concluded that experimenting with different text formats would be an effective way to help children develop their writing skills (NAEP, 1986). Bereiter and Scardamalia (1979) have also found that the number of written words produced is correlated with other indicators of writing quality. Perhaps the strongest argument pertains to the fact that students reported that they enjoyed writing dialogues. During an interview, one student reported that "Dialogue gives you freedom school doesn't give you and that made it more fun." For teachers searching for new and effective methods for writing instruction, this alone could be sufficient justification to incorporate dialogue into their writing programs.

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Table 1

Mean number of words produced for Free Writing and Dialogue Writing

	Experimental Phase				
	Phase 1		Phase 2		
Class:	Free Write	Dialogue	Free Write	Dialogue	Mean
#1	121.60	137.55	132.60	155.10	134.33
#2	75.07	96.70	88.40	96.80	88.12
#3	66.83	104.50	85.17	76.17	84.00
Mean	79.67	107.89	91.83	103.36	

Note: Class #3 is a classroom for special-needs students.

Table 2

Example of a sixth grade student's dialogue writing

(Dad)	Toni, do you want to go camping on our land Saturday?
(Toni)	Sure dad, I'll pack right now.
(Dad)	I have to pack to so I'll pick you up in an hour.
(Toni)	O.K. This is going to be fun Dad, did you bring enough food?
(Dad)	Yes.
(Toni)	I'll get the tent ready while you start the fire.
(Dad)	Are you almost done, because I'm going to start supper if you are.
(Toni)	Yes I'm almost done you can start cooking. What are we having?
(Dad)	We are having beef Terriaki fried potatos and hot chocolate.

Note: The student used different colored pens to distinguish the different characters. Character names are provided in parentheses here. Errors have not been corrected.

Figure 1

Mean number of words produced by writing phase